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Schweitzer says he's dropping bison plan

By The Associated Press

BOZEMAN - Gov. Brian Schweitzer says he is abandoning his "split state" idea for control of the veterinary disease brucellosis in Montana.

"I'm done," Schweitzer said in a weekend interview during the Montana-Montana State University football game here.

For the past two years, Schweitzer has sought to establish a special buffer or other administrative zone around Yellowstone National Park.

Brucellosis has been largely eradicated in the United States, but it persists in Yellowstone bison and elk. Occasional wildlife migrations out of the park have raised concern among some Montana cattle producers that brucellosis will be transmitted to their animals.

Federal officials said earlier this year that Schweitzer's idea was feasible.

By establishing a split-state status, if a cattle herd was found infected with brucellosis, only ranchers within the greater Yellowstone area would be forced to put their animals through costly tests before exporting cattle. The rest of the state would keep the brucellosis-free status held by Montana since 1985.

In May, brucellosis was found in a herd at Bridger. If a second case is uncovered within two years, the entire state stands to lose the brucellosis-free designation.

With a split-state status, Schweitzer said, 95 percent of Montana's ranchers would be protected.

The Montana Stockgrowers Association fought the proposal, claiming it would be impractical and expensive, and would divide the livestock industry.

If more brucellosis is detected, Rice said, completing the paperwork necessary for split-state status would take nearly as long as the time needed for the entire state to regain disease-free status, said Errol Rice, executive director of the association.

But another livestock group, the Montana Cattlemen's Association, had urged that Schweitzer's idea be pursued.

Consensus among ranch groups was necessary for the split-state idea to work, Schweitzer said Saturday.

"We threw them a life rope," he said. "They said 'We don't want any life ropes.' That's what their position is."

Rice said he didn't see the proposal as a lifeline, but rather as a step backward.

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